

Review of: Lila Abu-Lughod *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2013. 336pp. £21.99. ISBN 978 0 67472 516 4. Available as e-book.

International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-) , November 2014, Vol. 90, No. 6 (November 2014), pp. 1468-1469

Katerina Dalacoura, London School of Economics

25 September 2014

Abu-Lughod has written a polemical work which challenges the very category of 'Muslim women' which appears in the title. More an extended essay than an academic book, it draws on the author's past ethnographic research and, more importantly, her anthropological formation and experience in the Middle East to make its important and timely arguments. The target of Abu-Lughod is the 'common sense' about Islam which emerged in the United States post-9/11 and underpinned the Bush administration's 'war on terror'. In answer to the rhetorical question which constitutes the book's title, the author shouts out: 'Of course they don't! Leave them alone and sort yourselves out.' In six absorbing and lively chapters, Abu-Lughod marshals evidence from the life stories of a number of women (who happen to be Muslim, among other things), mostly in rural Egypt, to make a serious dent in the stereotype of 'the Muslim woman' and to question the very existence of such a uniform being. She shows that the images of disempowerment associated with that stereotype often do not hold and that, if anything, disempowerment is shared by both men and women in the Middle East and caused by material forces of domination which are local and global, political and economic. The needs, concerns and aspirations of 'Muslim' women, moreover, are not quite what we in the West imagine. Abu-Lughod argues persuasively that 'Islam' cannot be isolated from other aspects of women's lives and that depicting it as the source of injustices and inequalities, as is the tendency in recent debates, is untenable. 'Islam' as such does not exist; in the author's own words, 'IslamLand' is not a real place inhabited by real people.

The author wants to make a contribution to public debate and is not writing for a narrow academic audience. But will her argument be widely heard? The book risks being picked up and read only by the converted. This is because Abu-Lughod deliberately conflates extreme with mainstream views. Surely, even in the polarized US context, 'mainstream' opinion on Islam and the Muslim woman is not represented by the likes of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the virulent anti-Islam campaigner, and Laura Bush, wife of the US president with such responsibility for the catastrophic obsession with 'Islam' gripping the world? The author makes no distinction between neo-conservative and liberal opinion and often treats them as if they are equally responsible for western imperialism. This may have been so in recent US history but her argument ignores the powerful non-interventionist liberal strand which treats the coercive imposition of values as a contradiction in terms.

Abu-Lughod underlines the distinction between 'respecting difference' and 'cultural relativism'. But despite numerous examples, it is hard to pin down exactly what she means by it: the space between the two positions is narrow to the point of vanishing and, as the book progresses, the claim that she supports universal values becomes increasingly unconvincing. She is silent over hard issues such as the (principle of) polygamy and genital mutilation. Her discussion of honour crimes in chapter 4 is confusing: it contains an enlightening and even moving exposition of the broader meaning of 'honour' but I, at least, don't grasp

her moral stance towards the crimes associated with it (though she is right that the term 'honour crime' must be dropped and the acts treated as simple crimes). To emphasize the West's 'holier than thou' approach to Islam, the author points out that the position of women there is still unequal, but she does not acknowledge that the ills that bedevil women—such as domestic violence and inequities of all kinds—are outlawed in the West, whereas they are legal in some settings informed by particular versions of Islamic law. Yes, what Muslim women wear or do not wear is not our business and 'the reductive interpretation of veiling as the quintessential sign of women's unfreedom' (p. 40) is at the heart of essentializing Islam and all the problems that derive from doing so. However, that even the burka can sometimes be liberating and can be variously understood in different contexts, does not detract from the fact that it *is* a symbol of male domination and coercion.